

Civilian Research Project Senior Service College Fellow

US Support for Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the recent events of the Arab Spring the United States carefully chose when and where it would take an overt and proactive role in support for the pro democracy movements. However, the current National Security Strategy states clearly that the United States will be proactive and show global leadership in support of democratic movements as a matter of policy and principle. While the particular sensitivities of the Arab world may call for a subtle approach, the world watches the United States carefully during such events. The charge of US foreign policy being driven by narrow self-interests such as oil and its own security concerns is a familiar charge by its critics. In cases where the US has intervened for humanitarian reasons the result has often been a demonstration of weak resolve to see the intervention through. While motives are by nature enigmatic, the historical consistency of the US promotion of democracy is unequivocal. In the next few years the United States will be challenged to balance its interests for stability and democracy in the new governments of North Africa. To negotiate these challenges the US government must view success in long term structural democratic development.

US SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

What should those engaged in democracy movements around the world make of the recent involvement of the United States in Libya? Does it signal a willingness for the US to take a more proactive role in supporting forceful resistance toward authoritarian regimes? But what about the situations in Syria or Bahrain? Does the lack of United States involvement in the pro democracy movements of these countries also say something about the US calculus to support pro democracy movements? Just how serious is the United States when it comes to promoting democracy around the world?

In the recent events of the Arab Spring the United States carefully chose when and where it would take an overt and proactive role in support for the pro democracy movements. The caution exhibited by the US is obviously due to strategic relationships with its leaders and the volatility of the region. However, the current National Security Strategy states clearly that the United States will be proactive and show global leadership in support of democratic movements as a matter of policy and principle¹. But in many of the individual cases of the Arab Spring, the actions of the administration looked less like leadership and more like “let’s wait and see what happens”. In the case of Libya, rather than lead, the current American administration chose to take a back seat to French and other European leadership when the opportunity arose to oust one of the most repressive regimes in Africa; that of Muammar Gaddafi. While the particular sensitivities of the Arab world may call for a subtle approach, the world watches the United States carefully during such events. For decades the world has heard the United States preach democracy but actions always speak louder than words and the actions of the United States often bring into question its true motives that may lurk behind its

prodemocracy rhetoric. The charge of US foreign policy being driven by narrow self-interests such as oil and its own security concerns is a familiar charge by its critics. Additionally, in cases where the US has intervened for humanitarian principles the result has often been a demonstration of weak resolve to see the intervention through; as witnessed in Somalia 1994.

While motives are by nature enigmatic, the historical consistency of the US promotion of democracy is unequivocal. The promotion of democracy has been a pillar of US foreign policy for many decades. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have long agreed that the United States should use its example to promote and even pressure democratic development in areas of the world beset by authoritarian and repressive regimes. The foreign policy of the current administration is no different. The current National Security Strategy from 2010, in speaking about the United States attempts to influence states toward democracy, asserts “when our overtures are rebuffed, we must lead the international community in using public and private diplomacy, and drawing on incentives and disincentives, in an effort to change repressive behavior.”² However, in leading the international community to change repressive behavior, the US is often very selective; as in the case of Libya.

The case of Zimbabwe is especially instructive in examining the US track record on support for democracy development in authoritarian countries with little to no direct US strategic interest. While Zimbabwe is not strategically located, has no oil reserves and no terrorism problem, the United States has been very active in supporting the countries democratic development and good governance since the 1960s. Especially since independence from minority rule in 1980, the US has played an active role in

supporting civil society and institutional development. However, when the current president, Robert Mugabe, began to lose public support, the country slid into an increasingly authoritarian and brutally repressive regime. This regime skillfully uses fear and patronage to maintain its grip on power. However, in 2008 Mugabe failed to win an election for the first time since 1980.³ And since 2008 the Mugabe regime has become increasingly tenuous nationally and isolated regionally.

The disputed 2008 election resulted in a brokered agreement and divided government. And despite the agreement that is supposed to share power between the two leading political parties, the ruling political party in Zimbabwe is the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) led by President Robert Mugabe. ZANU-PF has ruled Zimbabwe since its independence in 1980. The main opposition party is the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai. After a very bloody election in 2008, the ruling party was forced to enter into a unity government with the MDC. The United States says it supports the Government of National Unity (GNU) and full implementation of the agreement that it is based on.⁴ However, there is wide agreement that the GNU is dysfunctional. The two parties have not been able to work together and ZANU-PF holds nearly all the real governing power within the GNU. Therefore, both parties would like to see an election in the near future to produce a clear winner and movement toward a functional democratic government.

The Congressional Research Service estimates that the US has spent at least 10 Million USD alone on programs intended to promote democracy in Zimbabwe since 2002.⁵ Zimbabwe also receives regular assistance from several other countries. However, the bloody election of 2008 and its inability to produce a transition of power,

disillusioned many and left them asking if all the time and money have made any difference. A kind of *Zimbabwe fatigue* has settled over the international community. With another election looming in 2012 should the US maintain the status quo (with respect to its programmatic support)? Or does the situation call for something new? Certainly with US credibility on the line, the situation calls for a reevaluation and fresh assessment of what is needed in the current context. But does it really matter if US efforts to promote democracy produce any real change? Yes, it does matter. It matters because it goes to the heart of the National Security Strategy; that of being an example to the world. When the US starts down the road of injecting programs to promote democracy in authoritarian countries, it puts its moral authority and its efficacy as an example on the line. And in the case of Zimbabwe, the moral authority of the United States is on the line in Southern Africa.

Therefore, with its credibility on the line, the United States should double down on its efforts to promote democratic institutions and processes at this critical time in Zimbabwe. An important area where the credibility of the US is at stake is in civil society. The United States has played a critical role in the development of civil society groups and in the strengthening of democratic institutions in Zimbabwe since 1980 and should not abandon its efforts now when they are needed the most. In fact, a very large portion of the Democracy and Good Governance assistance from the US goes to support the viability of civil society organizations that promote democracy. Without robust, dare I say invasive, support from the international community, the next election in Zimbabwe will be no different than the last three. We know from past history and well documented research that when Zimbabweans go to the polls to express their political

voice, they will be harassed, intimidated, tortured, and even killed if they do not succumb to the will of ZANU-PF. Therefore, the United States must lead the international community to ensure any future election in Zimbabwe results in an accurate reflection of its citizen's desires.

Strong prodemocracy support in Zimbabwe by the United States will go a long way to undergird the moral authority of the United States in democracy promotion efforts. The moral authority of the United States, especially within institutions like the United Nations, is primarily derived from its example. When the US needs or wants international support to advance a foreign policy goal, more and more, nations around the world are questioning its motives. Oil and terrorism are seen by many around the world as the only interests that truly matter to the US. When US security or its economy are threaten, it does not hesitate to act and act with commitment. As a result, even when the US attempts to act in events that are less self-interested and more humanitarian, individuals will look for the self-interested angle.

For example, the vile Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) operating in Central Africa is universally condemned and reviled but in no way a threat to US security. The US for many years has provided assistance to the government of Uganda and support to the victims of LRA violence to help alleviate the suffering in Northern Uganda. The US has also provided modest military assistance to the Ugandan Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) to develop needed material capacity to address the security threat from the LRA. In 2011 the Obama Administration pledged 100 US military advisors to help Uganda and other affected African nations finally eliminate this evil group from the region. However, despite this long-term focused effort; press from the region is already

speculating that the real motive behind the US initiative is to get control of newly discovered oil reserves in Uganda.⁶

Such a cynical view of US foreign policy is not uncommon in Africa. The United States does often act very narrowly in its own self-interest. However, the US has also poured billions of dollars into programs to support the development of civil society and democratic processes around the world. In 2011 alone, the US devoted almost 2.5 billion USD to democracy and good governance promotion programs worldwide.⁷ These funds have gone to create and sustain civil society groups and activists who would otherwise likely not exist. In Zimbabwe alone there are at least eighty civil society organizations that conduct activities funded by the US or other donor nations to promote democracy.⁸ These organizations have grown to depend on US and western support in order to face the targeted harassment and repression they face by the autocrats in power. We know from the past that during any future election, this community will surely be attacked and their activities manipulated by the ruling political party. Therefore, having created and sustained this community for more than ten years, can the US remain muted and wait for other countries to act while Zimbabwe heads toward another bloody election?

We know any future election will again be bloody and ineffectual for two basic reasons: first, ZANU-PF and the military leadership of Zimbabwe have become so intertwined as to become indistinguishable; and two, the Chinese will continue to support ZANU-PF no matter how oppressive and badly it behaves. We know from more than ten years of reporting by independent media, human rights organizations, and civil society groups that ZANU-PF conducts its oppressive and deadly tactics with the

support of the Zimbabwean Defense Forces (ZDF) and the Zimbabwean Republic Police (ZRP).⁹ Gradually, but deliberately, ZANU-PF has militarized its political structures. This has occurred at every level of the party, from national organs such as the Central Committee down to the smallest local level team. The integration is so pervasive; there is now no practical separation between the functions of the party and the security institutions.

The 2008 election was a highpoint for security sector interference in politics. ZDF and ZRP officers were repeatedly cited for their involvement in human rights violations during the 2008 election. Members of the military and the police routinely coordinate with members of ZANU-PF, most notably in rural areas, to support the suppression of political activity by opposition groups. Members of the ZDF and the ZRP went so far as to torture and murder the political opponents of ZANU-PF. Here are just a few excerpts from the US Department of State's 2008 Human Rights report on Zimbabwe:

- a. The Joint Operation Command (JOC), a group of senior security and civilian authorities, maintained control of the security forces, and often used them to control opposition to ZANU-PF.¹⁰
- b. State-sanctioned use of excessive force increased, and security forces tortured members of the opposition, student leaders, and civil society activists with impunity.¹¹
- c. Security forces killed opposition members during the year. For example, on May 14, Tonderai Ndira, MDC Secretary for Security in the party's Youth Assembly, was abducted from his home in a suburb of Harare by suspected security agents. His mutilated body was found on May 21.¹²

- d. On May 22, MDC treasurer in Mashonaland East Shepherd Jani was abducted in Murehwa by four men suspected of being intelligence officers. Jani's mutilated body was found two days later.¹³
- e. There were killings by party supporters during the year. For example, on June 7, a mob of ZANU-PF supporters killed Dadirai Chipiro, the wife of Patson Chipiro, a MDC local chairman in Mhondoro, by cutting off her hand and both feet, dragging her body into the kitchen of their home, setting it on fire, and burning her alive.¹⁴

The marriage between ZANU-PF and the security forces of Zimbabwe continues in force today. Since the establishment of the Government of National Unity in 2009, senior officers within the security institutions have regularly boasted they will never respect or allow Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai to wield any real power in Zimbabwe. The Chief of the Defense Forces, General Constantine Chiwenga and the Chief of the Air Force of Zimbabwe, Air Marshall Perence Shiri both stated to the press that they would never salute Tsvangirai. Recently, the commander of 3rd Brigade in Mutare, Brigadier General Douglas Nyikayaramba stated to the press that the army would never allow Tsvangirai to become president.

However, the attitude of the military leadership runs counter to the overwhelming support the MDC has in the junior ranks of the military. Poll results showed after the 2008 election that if given the chance, the vast majority of soldiers in the ZDF would vote for Morgan Tsvangirai. The military leadership took note of this and has attempted to rectify it by re-educating its members.

Since the 2008 election the ZDF has created a new staff position at the brigade and battalion level. This new officer holds the title of Civil-Military Affairs Officer. The officer is ostensibly to coordinate military support to local civil institutions. The officer is also tasked with conducting classes to members of the battalion. These classes are said to educate the new soldiers to the history of the liberation struggle. This will ensure the lessons and heritage of the struggle are not forgotten. The initiative is, in fact, a thinly veiled attempt to warn soldiers that failure to support ZANU-PF will result in punitive action against them.

The military has also undertook to rewrite doctrine to support its involvement in politics. New doctrines, established at the ZDF Command and Staff College, conclude democracy programs supported by western governments and executed through NGOs are a form of low intensity conflict designed to force regime change on Zimbabwe. This fallacious idea is being codified in the published military doctrinal manuals of the ZDF. The new doctrines are a clear attempt for senior military officers to justify their unlawful actions. Additionally, specially detailed soldiers, dubbed the “boys on leave” still are deployed throughout the countryside.¹⁵ These soldiers constitute a standby force ready to work in concert with local ZANU-PF officials and members of youth militias to harass and intimidate members of the political opposition. Additionally, senior members of the military have been deputed to the Central Committee of ZANU-PF to provide leadership and direction in preparation for the coming political contest.

The second reason ZANU-PF stands to win any future election is the unflappable support they receive from the Peoples Republic of China. Given the heinousness of the ZANU-PF regime and its dependency on the ZDF to retain power, the lavish support

given to the ZANU-PF and ZDF leadership by the Chinese government is inexcusable. The Chinese government did not bat an eye to the flagrant abuses ZANU-PF heaped on its own people in 2008. In fact, Chinese support both morally and materially for the regime continues to grow. Chinese government and private assistance and investments are very visible and pervasive around the country. But most disturbing is continued Chinese support for the ZDF.

The new defense college just outside of Harare is a massive testament to the bond that exists between the Chinese government and the ZDF. The complex is being built with Chinese funds provided through a loan valued at \$98 million USD. The Chinese have long supported the military education system of the ZDF. The Chinese also provide assistance in the form of four Chinese officers who serve as instructors at the Staff College. This is the same staff college currently developing a military doctrine that will justify a military takeover in the event ZANU-PF loses an election.

The Chinese are also helping the leadership of the ZDF make money. The ZDF and Chinese businesses have entered into several joint business ventures in everything from farming to mining. Several of the companies given authorization to mine in the controversial Chiadzwa diamond fields are Chinese or have Chinese backers. These same companies also have significant ZDF representation in their structure. In particular, the ownership structures of Marange Resources, Anjin, and Sino-Zim are all rife with senior defense officials and senior members of ZANU-PF.¹⁶ The military involvement in diamond mining with the aid and support of the Chinese creates a significant revenue stream for the ZDF and ZANU-PF. This revenue will be used to fund the oppressive tactics of the ZDF and ZANU in any upcoming election.

The Chinese support is so important to the ZANU-PF regime that Chinese companies are often exempted from the indigenization regulations placed on all other foreign companies. These indigenization regulations have threatened major foreign investment and large capital projects that would be major boost to the ailing Zimbabwean economy. Major foreign companies such as Nestle and Anglo American have been forced to scale back or cancel operations due to the punitive indigenization measures. However, Chinese investments of even modest size are deemed “strategic” by the ZANU-PF regime and thus allow to skirt the burden of indigenization. This special privilege allows Chinese business to boom in an otherwise constrained and politically volatile business climate.

Therefore, the pro democracy activists in Zimbabwe stand little chance against the security apparatus and Chinese support that prop up the Mugabe regime. The pro democracy movement in Zimbabwe must receive continued support from the United States or it will be suppressed. Therefore, with the next election looming in 2012 or 2013, now is the time to redouble the US commitment to democratic development in Zimbabwe. As seen in Cote d’Ivoire, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, elections held under authoritarian leaders are pointless exercises without international oversight. The US should begin now coordinating support for the next Zimbabwean election with regional and international partners. Zimbabwean Finance Minister Tendai Biti has stated that the next election will cost approximately \$200 million USD. The main reason for such a high figure is because for Zimbabwe to have a chance at an election with an accurate vote count, the country must move to biometric

vote counting. For donor nations who have supported Zimbabwe during the last 10 years this is not much to ask.

Additionally, The US should not provide any election assistance unless there is verifiable security sector re-alignment and independent international monitoring of the election. Without both of these the election will be a waste of time and only get more Zimbabweans tortured and killed. The monitors need to be present at a minimum from three months prior to three months after the election. Anything less will ensure that ZANU-PF, with the help of the ZDF and ZRP and with the acquiescence of their Chinese friends, will steal another election and ordinary Zimbabweans will suffer once again.

The looming election crisis in Zimbabwe is an opportunity for the United States. Zimbabwe offers the opportunity to put actions behind words and let the United States show the world it will not stand by and watch another violent and deadly election crush the hopes that its own programs have seeded. When the entire world is fixated on the “Arab Spring”, the situation in Zimbabwe offers the US the chance to show the world that democracy matters in places where there is no oil, no “strategic interest”. By leading the international community in Zimbabwe, the United States can be an inspiration and example to democratic movements and democracy advocates everywhere.

The US experience in Zimbabwe is instructive as the US government attempts to construct a policy to help the transitional governments born out of the prodemocracy movements of the last couple years in the Arab world. The US support of prodemocracy civil society groups in Zimbabwe has put the US squarely opposed and without

influence to the ruling political party. Furthermore, it has left its finger prints on the groups it has funded. Civil society groups in Zimbabwe are now almost universally identified with the West and in particular the US government. ZANU-PF has little difficulty making the argument that civil society groups are tools of Western influence and therefore not in the best interest of Zimbabwe.

Countries of North Africa have colonial histories not unlike Zimbabwe's. The hangover for most countries with a colonial history results in suspicion and very cynical attitudes toward the West. Programs that promote ideas or philosophies that are deemed "Western" are thus scrutinized and often seen as promoting "foreign" influences. This presents a real challenge for the US. Promotion of civil society groups that clearly promote a US government agenda can easily be discredited by traditionalist in these societies.

Despite the challenges, US funded programs supporting the promotion and development of democracy have been active in Tunisia, Libya, and most notably in Egypt. The arrest and threat of prosecution for several American citizens by the Egyptian government spotlighted the activities of US funded organizations working to promote democracy. While there is plenty of political rhetoric in all three countries that lends support to democracy, all three countries come with solid histories of authoritarian rule and little adherence to democratic norms. In all three countries the US has pledged support to assist them in their transition to more open democratic systems. While support from the US is very likely to be welcome on the economic front, support for democratic processes and institutions will almost certainly be more difficult.

The protest and reform movements of the Arab Spring have led to unprecedented open political space in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. The manner in which this space was created clearly reveals two important new actors in these countries. One new actor is civil society writ large. Mobilized through wireless communications and social networking tools, youth organizations in particular have found a voice where they were once stifled from the political dialogue. Also, religiously based political parties have found space in the new political openness. In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt the authoritarian regimes of the recent past often claimed legitimacy through a necessity to protect a secular society from religious fundamentalism. Religiously based political groups were seen as threats to the limited freedom that did exist. In the wake of democracy movements of the last two years, religiously based political parties now are a part of the transitional and political processes taking place. Observers, pundits, and academics are mixed as to whether these religious groups will be able to operate in a system that is truly democratic. Many however do believe that the participation of religious or Islamist movements and parties in the political process has demonstrated growing fragmentation and pluralism inside their groups due to political competition. Still, it is clear that Western governments are wary of their involvement and watching them closely.

Examples of religious parties include Ennahda in Tunisia and the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt. In Tunisia's first post-revolution elections Ennahda took nearly 42 percent of the vote. Ennahda claims to be willing to respect the separation of powers, citizen's rights, and women's rights. In Egypt relatively free and fair elections have produced a parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamist parties dominated the elections for the lower house of parliament, as the Muslim Brotherhood's

Freedom and Justice party won nearly half of the seats, and the more conservative Salafist Nour party took one-quarter of the seats. The popularity and success of these parties will likely pose a challenge to the implementation of US support to civil society and prodemocracy groups.

Funding of prodemocracy activities takes many forms and it is difficult to capture all it in one appropriation. However, the Obama Administration has recently announced a comprehensive aid package to Tunisia that included 43.3 million USD to support rule of law, strengthen political participatory and inclusive processes, build the capacity of civil society and promote freedom of expression. The announcement further stated that the US will work with the Tunisian government and civil society to help Tunisia cross the threshold of eligibility for the Open Government Partnership and join the growing number of nations who are embracing openness as the new standard for governance.¹⁷

In another Whitehouse announcement the administration stated that “it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region and to support transitions to democracy. Real and durable democratic change in Tunisia and Egypt could have a transformative effect on the region and beyond. We will support free and fair elections, a vibrant civil society, basic rights to speak your mind and access information, and strong democratic institutions in both nations. We will empower women as drivers of peace and prosperity, supporting their right to run for office and meaningfully participate in decision-making because, around the world, history shows that countries are more prosperous and peaceful when women are more empowered.”¹⁸

These statements and financial support demonstrate that the US will attempt to shape the ongoing processes of reform in North Africa. This shaping by the United

States will be decidedly driven by a desire to see not just structural democratic development but also the development of social democratic norms. However, as previously stated, the newly created democratic space has allowed both the authoritarian and religious aspects of the political sphere to vie for power and influence. Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have all seen religiously based political parties gain significant popular support. The obvious question for the US is how to engage civil society evenly and avoid falling into the trap of “neo-colonialist” attempting to shape and mold North African societies into mirror images of the United States. If the 43 million USD pledged to Tunisia goes only to groups aligned with liberal civil society groups that support liberal political groups, it will not take long for the religiously based parties such as Ennahda to frame the US support as “interference” and something other than “home grown”. One must remember that in these relatively poor countries members of civil society organizations that are funded by the US enjoy a standard of living that is normally at a comfortable middle class level.

The manner in which prodemocracy programs are funded and managed will inevitably bring the US into conflict with the traditional and religiously conservative Islamist political parties. The challenge for US policymakers and diplomats in the region will be to balance the desire to support organizations that seek to mirror the US goals for democratization and the need to engage all segments of society with US funding to avoid having US assistance labeled partisan and biased against national interests in the countries it seeks to impact. As in the Zimbabwean experience, one can see how easy it is in a country with a colonial past to frame western supported activities as interference and neo-colonial.

Senator John Kerry recently articulated well how US funded programs would be tied to the development of democratic values in the American mold. In a statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator Kerry was quoted: “As the people of the region demand reform, our approach to the region must embody our core values. At the most basic level, that means that we must be consistent in encouraging governments everywhere to respond to the hopes, and needs, and rights of their citizens...we must push back against the consolidation of power that has bred economic stagnation, corruption, and popular dissatisfaction...the citizenry—the entire citizenry—must have a greater voice in the affairs of their government. Just as women made their voices heard on the streets of Cairo and Tunis, so their voices must be heard in the halls of government...we know that religious parties will seek a voice in the Middle East’s new political order, in Egypt and elsewhere. This may be reason for concern, but it is not reason to panic. We should engage the region’s political actors while standing by the courage of our convictions. We will reject radicalism and anti-Semitism, and we will embrace moderation. For a modern democracy to function, violence can have no place in the political process.”¹⁹

These words sound good to an American audience and they demonstrate how American policymakers will be constrained to provide support only to civil society groups in the western mold. However, as was seen in Zimbabwe and in many other places, if you attach funding to any particular morality or political vision, you are likely to get what you pay for. What you will get is a civil society and an associated political sector that dutifully reflects the values of the source of their funding. Therefore, even if promoting laudable societal goals, this community will not be seen as “home grown” and

instead will inevitably be viewed as tied to Western influence. Thus muting their influence and the ideals they promote.

Endnotes

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